

# Korean Media Strategies in Promoting Korean Dramas in Malaysia

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## ABSTRACT

TV drama series in Korea have become the favorite media genre and consequently, Malaysian viewers are inclined towards Korean dramas rather than other Asian ones. The purpose of this study is to explore the strategies employed by Korean media broadcasters in promoting Korean television dramas in Malaysia. This research uses qualitative methods to address the Korean drama phenomenon. Four respondents from selected Korean Broadcasters namely, from Seoul Broadcasting System (SBS) and the Korean Broadcasting System (KBS) were identified to participate in the in-depth interviews. The findings are significant in explaining the global success of Korean dramas. The results will also be able to help the Malaysian government in determining the future Malaysian media working plan.

## Keyword

Media, Promoting, Korea, Seoul Broadcasting System, Dramas, working plan.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The rapid rise of the Korean Wave in Malaysia has left scholars in a state of shock and perplexity, concluding that the Korean culture craze also evident in other Asian countries, has led researchers to seek better understanding of this sudden phenomena. Kim (2007) suggested that the increased interest in Korean dramas also developed the younger generation's admiration for Korean culture, language and fashion. What would be very significant to examine is how a multiracial country like Malaysia, rich in its history and cultural heritage, would be easily influenced by the influx of Korean dramas although both countries do not share any significant history.

Lee (2004), Cho (2005), Kim and Ryoo (2007), Tunstall (2008) and Ju (2010) also highlighted that even in Korea, such drama has become the preferred media genre amongst most television viewers. Having said that, Kim (2009) noted that the popularity of Korean music and dramas has brought heated discussions around East and Southeast Asia since the end of 1990s. Previous studies on Korean dramas argued two major areas: the first argument is that the factor that has helped the success of Korean dramas is their less expensive market price. Kim (2007), Yeon (2008) and Ryo (2009) mentioned that apart from audiences' acceptance, beauty, good looks and celebrity culture, another main factor that has been able to attract most people to buy Korean products is that they are comparatively cheaper than Japanese and Hong Kong dramas.

According to Ching (2000), Hayashi & Lee (2007), Lee, (2008), Ju (2010) and Vu (2011), the similarities between Asian cultures in certain aspects (respect for elders, strong family relationships, love and sexual modesty); has been able to attract Asian audiences to watch Korean dramas. There are also other factors

that are discussed as noted by Vu (2011) including cultural proximity, modern consumerism. Concerted efforts involving politics and economics have also contributed to the success of Korean dramas.

Kim and Ryoo (2007) noted "Hallyu (or the Korean Wave) and other cultural trends from Asia have gained popularity in the region since they represent something that is closer to home without racial or ethnic stigmatizing of their race and ethnic groups often found in cultural products from the West. The yearning to belong and to become a part of the mainstream drives the popularity of Hallyu in Asia. Though there may be different forms of suffering and exploitation in Hallyu dramas and movies, but they are different from what we see in Hollywood movies, which tend to parallel discrimination based on race and ethnicities present in the US" (Kim and Ryoo, 2007, pg. 134).

The globalization of Korea through the acceptance of its culture in Asia was achieved rapidly. Subsequently, its popularity spread to various European countries and also, worldwide. In particular, interest in Korean television dramas, songs and movies escalated rapidly across North and Southeast Asia, specifically in Japan, China, Mongolia, Vietnam, Taiwan, Malaysia and Thailand.

According to Sang (2010), although Korean television drama has been popular in Asia, it was not something that was initially planned by the Korean government. Sang noted that historically, the South Korean government has invested in the development of popular culture, but the Korean Wave was an unplanned phenomenon and the government had no intention to maintain it. Also, the Korean entertainment industry was focusing on profits, rather than trying to provide an upgraded version of its products. For many critical reasons, the Wave faced a sudden decline. However, recognizing the potential of television drama in the Asian region, the Korean government began to take progressive steps. From then on, Sang (2010) explained further that the South Korean government has recognized the importance of maintaining and reinitiating the Korean Wave all over Asia, as well as the importance of spreading its popularity to places where it is yet unknown. The reinitiating of the Wave no longer focused merely on economic benefits but is reflected in their long-term policy, in the belief that it would play a vital role in enhancing South Korea's national brand. However, there is no clear statement of how the Korean government will plan or execute it in order to maintain and gain popularity in the future. Previous studies have also not indicated the media strategies that have been used by Koreans to maintain their newly established name on the international front.

## 2. BACKGROUND OF STUDY

With its 5000 years of history, Korea has experienced turbulent times in the 20th century. The nation suffered at the hands of

Japanese colonialism lasting over 35 years when the Koreans were being turned Japanese. After colonialism was quickly the Korean War began and this devastated much of the nation's economic and social infrastructure. So Korea began to rebuild almost everything from scratch. Economically, the country embarked on efforts to catch up to so called the developed countries and this included cultural tendencies such as imports of foreign cultural products. Ancient Koreans absorbed Buddhism, Confucian teachings and Chinese writings and traditions (The Korean Wave, 2011: p. 17; Jang & Paik, 2012).

At the beginning of the Korean Wave, the government was targeting at exporting its culture of popularity as a current initiative for economy where it was also a part of the plan to tackle the 7% plunge in its GDP caused by the Asian Financial Crisis (Kim, 2011). As a part of the planning to maintain long-term stability of the Korean Wave, the Korean leadership was aware of the need to highlight of developing environment that is conducive and attractive for non-governmental entrepreneurs. Due to this, they formed the "Korean Wave Policy Consultation Committee" consisting only academicians and private experts in order to notify the government on the progress and issues faced by the cultural industry at ground level. Firms that export Korean culture abroad was also granted millions dollar grants from the government. Economically, the strategy proved to be successful as illustrated by the \$3 billion entertainment exports in 2009, which more than doubled the 2002 exports. (Kim, 2011)

Although earlier on, Kim (2011) attested that it seemed too early to claim the success of the government's interventions in making Korean pop culture as a soft power tool (especially in the face of challenges faced in China), there is evidence to show that South Korea has successfully established itself as a media powerhouse in East and South Asia. This resulted from the government's decision to rebrand the national image by re-launching the Korean wave and using it as the nation's soft power in competing more effectively in twenty-first-century global society. The eventual circulation of the Korean wave in neighboring countries resulted in the success of the entertainment industry and was a vital tool in enhancing the image of the nation. According to Ryoo (2008), the impact of the Korean wave has not only permeated popular culture but is also a measure of positive lifestyle for many Asian people. Many Asians did not know much about South Korea or knew only a few simple, often stereotypical things about South Korea. Images associated with South Korea were negative and related to events such as the Korean War, cycles of poverty and political instability (Lee, 2007, p. 29). However, these negative images have diminished dramatically due to trendy entertainers, new technology, and the image of contemporary South Korean lives through dramas and movies (Lee, 2011).

Yang (2008) claims that Korean dramas are a model of successful local products that create incomes from its international markets which also contribute to the country's competitiveness in the international economy. As a result of the plans and support given by the government, the popularity of Korean dramas is translated into the image of "a mature cultural industry" with "integrated promotional strategy" (Yang, 2008). Previously, Kim (2007), pointed out a question as to why has the Korean wave been able to take off as dramatically at this point as South Korea was once being under colonisations or overshadowed by foreign powers for a few centuries. In fact, the Asian region has been influenced by the products coming from the Western and Japan thus the sudden emergence of Korean Wave's popularity has caused a surprise (Kim, 2007).

Another important economic explanation to the rise of the Korean wave is the media privatization that swept across Asia in 1990s (Kim, 2011). This saw private broadcasting firms favouring cheaper, quality products like Korean dramas over American or Japanese ones. Notably, the expansion of South Korea's electronics like Samsung and LG played a role in popularizing Korean dramas as these firms distributed free copies to Asian broadcasting stations as part of their initiatives to promote their own electronic products in the mid-1990s.

### 3. RESEARCH OBJECTIVE AND QUESTION

The success of the Korean drama industry can provide inspiration and motivation as well as encouragement to propel the Malaysian drama industry to emulate the glorious future as what the Korean Wave has achieved. The strategy and approach of the Korean drama industry then could be applied and exploited for the Malaysian drama industry to be successful globally. The objective of this study is;

- To investigate the strategies of Korean media broadcasters in promoting Korean dramas. Based on the identified research gaps, the following research question is:

- What are the strategies adopted by Korean media broadcasters in promoting Korean television dramas?

### 4. LITERATURE REVIEW

The Asian media industry seems also keen to create their own Asian 'Hollywood'. Iwabuchi (2010), and Newsweek Asia (2001) are of the view that collaborations and partnerships are usually formed once media industries engage in international marketing and span transnational markets. Thus the idea of 'Asiawood' emerges, with Inter-Asian promotion and co-production of media cultures as a direct result of the said industry collaborations within the region.

Yeon (2008) outlined several developments that made it opportune for Korean popular culture to penetrate various Asian markets. Amongst others he cited the inclusion of sentiments related to Confucianism into music videos and soap operas, technological advancements superior visual images, dynamic movements of Korean producers as well as the display of South Korea in television dramas. All these, coupled with the sudden economic drop of Asian companies meant that the Asian markets were ready for newer Asian products, including Korean ones. Combining different media types helped to launch the Korean wave as a successful industry. As was observed by Ryoo (2009), in Culture Industry and Cultural Capital (2005), the arrival of cable television and satellites created a powerful technological platform which could accommodate multi-channel broadcasting. When South Korean music, television drama and cinema began flourishing in the Asian market, it was combined with the technological advancements mentioned to create the cultural phenomenon which entails in-depth analyses on the international environment and the demands of media contents (Ryoo, 2009). Prior research by Ju (2010) that Asian media industry highlighted on discovering the presence of global-local immersion related to international market share of media hence intra-Asian media flow will not regard as important as the academic or industrial analysis. The presence of irregular intra-Asian media flow influences not only the local-on-local trade but also its cultural reproduction within the regional industry of media (Iwabuchi, 2005; Ju, 2010). The mixing of Korean media with other regional styles, systems and services complicates the culture in East Asia towards a shared media market (Ju, 2010). Ju (2010) in her interview surveys, discovered the need for

Korean programs to have appropriate local content for them to be successfully marketed in Asian countries. They had to address the specific social or psychological sensitivities of Eastern audiences. She asserted, 'Firstly, for the promotional purpose of historical Korean dramas, in-depth reviews with regards to its historical facts, usefulness and importance towards the local history need to be thoroughly conducted. Secondly, it also enhances more reviews on post-programming with regard to dramas that are exported which contain numerous stages of repacking in order to suit the standard of local media'. In summary, the media strategy adopted by the Korean media has shown a success and achieved the desired outcome. The popularity of the Korean wave, especially the Korean dramas locally and abroad has proven that it is very significant to have an effective media strategy. Thus, the following topic would be discussing the Korean media industry.

## 5. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Television effects have been the most researched among media studies (Livingstone, 1998). Methodologically, mass communication scholars have created various models for researching television effects. Straubharr's theory of cultural proximity (1991, 1996) illuminates existing region-centered media flows. Cultural proximity defines how transnational media content from an adjacent geographic region or a region similar in other aspects, has greater influence on audiences residing in that particular region. Therefore as for this study, the theoretical journey into the Korean media strategy conducted from the perspective of the theory of Cultural

## 6. THE STUDY

This study was based in Malaysia and focuses on the strategies employed by Korean media in promoting Korean television dramas in Malaysia. To this end, the researcher uses qualitative method to address the research problems. This method is best used as it aims to investigate human phenomena and investigate interpretations and meaning that are unknown and needed to be explored. Literature reviews may yield insufficient information about the study and thus more information are needed to be gathered through exploration from participants (Creswell, 2014). Hennick, Hutter & Baily (2011) concluded that qualitative research is most suitable to address 'why' questions to explain and understand issues or 'how' questions that describe processes or behaviour. This further enforces the reason behind why the researcher has decided to use qualitative method as the research methodology as it enables the researcher to understand why and how Korean dramas have been successful in having a big impact on Malaysian's audiences. Researchers usually employ these three methods; participant observation, in-depth interview and focus groups. Each of these methods have specific advantages and are used in accordance with the data required (Mack, et al, 2011). To achieve the data required for this study, the researcher employed the in-depth interview method. Face-to-face interviewed were conducted for better understanding of their views on the research and their culture. The researcher has chosen to recruit participant who resides in Korea by using the concept of purposeful sampling. The researcher has identified four interviewees from two (2) main broadcasting systems in Korea namely Korean Broadcasting System (KBS) – two (2) participants and Seoul Broadcasting System (SBS) – also two (2) participants. To description the data, the researcher use themes to analyse qualitative data. The themes are organized into layers, from basic elementary themes to more specific ones.

Layering involves s representing the data using interconnected levels of themes (Creswell, 2012). The researcher subsumes minor themes within major themes and includes major themes within broader themes. The entire analysis becomes more and more complex as the researcher works upward toward broader and broader levels of abstraction. Through recognizing these layers, it helps researcher to understand the use of themes in layered qualitative analysis.

The next step in the process of analyzing the data is to code the data. In the coding process, the raw data collected are then segmented and labeled to form descriptions and broad themes in the data. This process is essential in order to make sense out of the text data and narrowing the data collected into relevant themes (Creswell, 2012).

## 7. FINDING

Based on the research question, four (4) dimensions of strategy that described the approaches in promoting Korean television drama were identified in the data. The dimensions are categorized as follows: a) history, b) economy, c) government, and d) systematic approach.

According to two of the respondents), as a starting point for identifying the Korean media strategy, it is vital to understand the history and background of the Korean nation in order to grasp a clear picture of the whole scenario.

### 7.1 History

Although Korea has been compared to Africa in the past, it has undergone a dramatic transformation in the last 50 years, one that would normally have occurred within a century for most nations (Paik, 2001). The nation has had a volatile national history as alluded to by Paik (2001), who noted the ills the country suffered under Japanese colonialism for over 35 years. During this time, the Japan tried to turn the Koreans into Japanese. When Colonialism ended, the country was ravaged by the Korean War, which further plundered the nation's economic and social infrastructure (Paik, 2001).

Korean has a very long and tragic history which has never been able to be told in deep and wholeheartedly to the world. They had been through the war just like Vietnam in some degrees and overcoming all kinds of burden such as tragedies and poverty. They had lots of war been through a lot of suffered. According to Paik (2001), Korean had to rebuild its strength from scratch in almost all aspects. It began vigorous efforts to catch up with the developed countries around the world, economically and culturally (Paik, 2001). The respondent personally viewed that Korean and Japanese history plays a vital role in shaping Korean broadcasting strategies. Korean observed the two lessons taught by the ideological conflict as being, firstly, to deeply understand the human will and second, to acknowledge the others' view of life and their beliefs. Due to the hard upbringing and the past suffering that Koreans have gone through, the respondents believed that it is time that Koreans need to come out and stand up for their own future. In particular, their history brought out their strengths and empowered them to rise, fight, and rebuild the country so that their people can once again rise above hardship and poverty. Apart from the tragic history, the economy has also drawn a big impact on Koreans. By recognizing the Korean economy, a clear understanding of the Korean media broadcasting business and strategy can be achieved.



## 7.2 Economy

South Korea does not have many resources except for its arable land (one fifth) in the southwest (Postlethwaite, 1988) and other raw materials such as Tungsten, limestone, and lead. Its water resources enable the production of hydro- electric power but besides these, the country relies heavily on imports, such as oil, iron ore, copper, gold, and silver. Agriculture also serves as the main income source for Koreans despite having the world's smallest average farm area per household. (California Department of Education, 1992). (Paik, 2001).

In 1953, the per capita income was only 1% of the Organization of Economic and Comparative Development (OECD) average, but in 1992, it had grown to be almost one-third of that average (OECD, 1998). Since then, South Korea has become the 11th largest trading country and major exporters of electronics, cars, clothing, petrochemicals, machinery, ships, and steel (Hwang, 1993; Song, 1997). Related to the above mentioned, respondents admitted that to be able to sustain a living in Korea, it requires a strong will. Everyone is working hard to live; they are forced to compete with each other to survive. Due to the situation, Korean is inadvertently facing with an economy conflict. The conflict arises when everyone is looking and searching on how to make profit and expanding their businesses to overseas market as their local market is deemed insufficient to sustain profits. Hence, Korean realized the need to be their best and work diligently so as to generate and increase income. Similarly, television stations are also aware of the need to produce programs are of international standing, these program must create demand, universally attractive so that they may be globally marketed. As stated by Kim (2006), during the 2000s, 'Korean Wave' rose to become an economic phenomenon that contributing significantly to Korea's national economy. In due time, the wave transformed into a transnational phenomenon and was not only confined to the home country (Ravina 2009) (Peichi, 2014).

These economic developments have produced specific results. "South Korea is now the twelfth largest economy in the world, and its' entertainment companies are able to finance shows and movies with production values much higher than in most of Asia" (Ryoo, 2007, p. 140) (Lee, 2011).

## 7.3 Government

When South Korea was badly hit by the Asian Financial Crisis at the end of the 20th century, the government began aggressively seeking economic opportunities through the Korean Wave phenomenon that was already developing rapidly. This involved the government in taking proactive measures to support its domestic cultural industry. (Kim, 2011).

The Korean government recognizes the ripple effect caused by their vibrant range of cultural industries, ranging from film and television dramas, to gaming, animation and music. This is due to the industry's reliance on the latest developments in electronics and ICT. The ripple effect is illustrated by not only the demand from the cultural industries, but most importantly, the Wave promoted innovation in the Korean electronics and ICT industries. (Kwon & Kim, 2013).

The SBS respondent disclosed that the Korean government's own supporting body called Korean Creative Content Agency (KOCCA) is a government agency under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism. It is responsible for governing cultural content. The government has some funds to help any productions to expand their business. However, the fund is very much in terms of promoting their finished production abroad.

The government was supportive and arranged for specific industry based financial backing for organizations in the cultural industry (MCST 2009) (Kwon & Kim, 2013). For example, from 1999 to 2003, the government gave out loaned out approximately 50 billion Korean Won to these organizations. The overall government support was focused exclusively on the sectors that showed the most promise and potential for growth, such as films, dramas, gaming and music (MCST 2009, KOCCA 2012). The government gave comprehensive backing to these sectors including technological support, skilled workforce development, the funding of infrastructure and export aid programs. The aid provided was enabled through initiatives between quasi-governmental organizations and the private sector and were specifically designed to promote the business activities of these cultural firms (Baek 2009).

In short, it is clearly shown that the Korean government has done a lot of support and effort to help the creative industry in order to improve their economic and promoting Korean culture globally.

## 7.4 Systematic Approach

A systematic approach to foreign market entry translates in strategic planning and an effective organizational structure for the marketing function (Louter, Ouwerkerk and Bakker 1991). Shoham (1999) proposed that planning for international markets results in the identification of strategies that can enhance export performance. Even more, high performing exporters have a "desire to capitalize on the firm's competitive advantages" (Francis and Collins-Dodd 2000, p.90). Therefore, exporting companies will design their marketing strategy in order to build sustainable competitive advantages. (Gomez & Valenzuela, 2005).

The interviews revealed that the respondents did not have a comprehensive promotion strategy. They admitted that it was vital to have proper strategies but where the Korean Wave especially Korean dramas were concerned, history and self-awareness led them to practice several different approaches. However, the information obtained can be categorized into two; namely i) experience and, ii) activities.

### 7.4.1 Experience

The Asian culture was shaped through a series of historical events and the local living experiences of the population (Ju, 2010). According to Kraidy (2005), the "local" involves construction of socio-cultural meanings, selection of different power struggles, outcomes, and the social actions by individuals within their own system (Ju, 2010). The respondent pointed out that the hard times and circumstances experienced by the population led them to live and react accordingly. The challenges, bitter life experiences and historical (Jang & Paik, 2012) as well as economic crises (Paik, 2001) pushed the Korean media to a higher level confidence to pursue excellence and compete internationally in the creative industry. They became courageous and fearless in pursuit of success to overcome their problems.

### 7.4.2 Activities

According to Currás-Pérez, Ruiz-Mafé, & Sanz-Blas, the audiences has a much more realistic perception of television content, and therefore once favorable social relationships have developed, their exposure to this type of program will increase, thereby favoring purchase (Currás-Pérez, Ruiz-Mafé, & Sanz-Blas, 2011). Besides the experiences that influenced Korean media approaches, the respondent revealed the plan or activities conducted to introduce Korean dramas abroad. Such

activities entail presenting actors to countries that are highly likely to become consumers of Korean drama. This systematic approach adds to the strength and success of Korean media strategy. The systematic approach was created and implemented due to their previous and current hardships, struggles and pressure to survive. From the findings, it can be said that Korean media broadcasting strategies are rooted to the national history, economics, government support and systematic approach. Notably, their rich life experiences and historical background have also contributed to their drama success. These factors have been instrumental in promoting Korean television drama. As Hogarth (2013) said, Korean television dramas deal with universal human themes that touch the sentiments of viewers from varied cultural backgrounds. This factor explains the wide popularity and huge success of the Korean Wave and why it continues to make further inroads into other cultures (Hogarth, 2013).

## 8. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The hard upbringing and past suffering that Koreans have experienced, the Korean believed that they need to come out and stand up for their own future. What they have gone through, and in particular, their devastating history, has opened their eyes and renewed their strength so that they are determined to stand up and fight for their people and to rebuild their beloved homeland. Due to the situation, Korean is inadvertently facing with an economy conflict. The conflict arises when everyone is looking and searching on how to make profit and expanding their businesses to overseas market as their local market is deemed insufficient to sustain profits. Having said that, the government also aggressively advanced the nation's entertainment sectors that showed much growth potential such as films, dramas, gaming and music (MCST 2009, KOCCA 2012). The government provided comprehensive for these sectors in terms of technological assistance, skilled workforce development, infrastructure development and export assistance programs. The study also found that economic conditions and geography of Korea is another push factor for the Korean media's achievements. In other words, it is mobilizing forces to Korea to formulate goals and objectives to media success abroad. The most significant outcome of this study reveals that the serious hard work in creative industry and also the culture is truly has led to the success of the promotion campaign itself. In fact, they have used the adverse economic situation in Korea in to open up other opportunities and realize their abilities in the creative industry.

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